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## EARLY GOLD DISCOVERIES IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA.

WHERE, WHEN AND BY WHOM WAS GOLD FIRST DISCOVERED IN  
CALIFORNIA ?

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J. M. GUINN.

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[Read November 3, 1890.]

If asked to locate the place where gold was first discovered in California, probably nine out of every ten of the intelligent residents of the State of the more recent arrivals would give Sutter's mill race at Coloma as the location. Even among the Argonauts of '49—those searchers after the golden fleece of Phryxus' ram—who are popularly supposed to know all about

“ The days of old,  
The days of gold,”

probably no larger percentage could give a correct answer. If the anxious searcher for historical truth were to consult the ordinary run of histories of California, he would find in them repeated and repeated, with slight variations, the old, old story of Sutter's mill race and Marshall's wonderful find therein.

Yet, with all due respect to the historians—good, bad and indifferent ; with all deference to the opinions of the Argonauts, and with patriotic regard for the wisdom of the conscript fathers of the State who reared a statue to the memory of Marshall, the so-called first discoverer of gold, I here enter a protest against the iteration and reiteration of the story that Coloma was the place where gold was first discovered in California, that Marshall was the first discoverer, and 1848 the year of the first discovery.

Outside of Bancroft's voluminous history and the published reminiscences of pioneers who lived in the country previous to 1848, it is very rare indeed to find, in any compilation dignified by the name of history, any mention of the fact that gold had been found and extensively mined in California previous to 1848.

Even Bancroft, voluble enough on most subjects connected with California history, and sometimes tediously prolix in his details of the petty quarrels and bloodless revolutions of California rulers, disposes of the first gold discovery very briefly. He calls it a “ local item that merits brief mention.”

The fullest and most reliable account of the first discovery of gold in California is that written by the first president of our society,

Colonel J. J. Warner, a pioneer of 1831, and published in "An Historical Sketch of Los Angeles County" (a work now out of print). I quote from this sketch :

"While statements respecting the existence of gold in the earth of California and its procurement therefrom have been made and published as historical facts, carrying back the date of the knowledge of the auriferous character of this State as far as the time of the visit of Sir Francis Drake to this coast, there is no evidence to be found in the written or oral history of the missions, the acts and correspondence of the civil or military officers, or in the unwritten and traditional history of Upper California that the existence of gold, either with ores or in its virgin state, was ever suspected by any inhabitant of California previous to 1841, and, furthermore, there is conclusive testimony that the first known grain of native gold dust was found upon or near the San Francisco ranch, about forty-five miles north-westerly from Los Angeles city, in the month of June, 1841. This discovery consisted of grain-gold fields (known as placer mines), and the auriferous fields discovered in that year embraced the greater part of the country drained by the Santa Clara river from a point some fifteen or twenty miles from its mouth to its source, and easterly beyond them to Mount San Bernardino."

The story of the discovery as told by Warner and by Don Abel Stearns agrees in the main facts, differing, however, materially in the date. Stearns says gold was first discovered by Francisco Lopez, a native of California, in the month of March, 1842, at a place called San Francisquito, about thirty-five miles northwest from this city (Los Angeles). "The circumstances of the discovery by Lopez as related by himself are as follows: Lopez, with a companion, was out in search of some stray horses, and about midday they stopped under some trees and tied their horses out to feed, they resting under the shade, when Lopez, with his sheath-knife, dug up some wild onions, and in the dirt discovered a piece of gold, and, searching further, found some more. He brought these to town, and showed them to his friends, who at once declared there must be a placer of gold. This news being circulated, numbers of the citizens went to the place, and commenced prospecting in the neighborhood, and found it to be a fact that there was a placer of gold."

Col. Warner says: "The news of this discovery soon spread among the inhabitants from Santa Barbara to Los Angeles, and in a few weeks hundreds of people were engaged in washing and winnowing the sands and earth of these gold fields." Warner visited the mines a few weeks after their discovery. He says: "From these mines was obtained the first parcel of California gold dust received at

the United States Mint in Philadelphia, and which was sent with Alfred Robinson, and went in a merchant sailing ship around Cape Horn." This shipment of gold was 18.34 ounces before, and 18.1 ounces after melting, *fineness* .926, value \$344.75—over \$19 to the ounce—a veay superior quality of gold dust.

It may be regarded as a settled historical fact that the first discovery of gold in Alta California was made on the San Francisco Rancho, in the Santa Feliciana Cañon, in the County of Los Angeles. This cañon is about ten miles northwest of Newhall and forty northwest of Los Angeles.

It is also an established fact that the first discoverer was Francisco Lopez, also known by the name of Cuso, a herdsman living at that time on the Piru Rancho. Lopez had been for many years previously mayordomo of the San Fernando Mission. The time of the discovery is not satisfactorily settled. Col. Warner, usually very reliable, gives June, 1841, as the date, and quotes Don Ygnacio del Valle, on whose rancho the discovery was made, and who was appointed "encargado de justicia" to preserve order in the mining district, as one of his authorities for that date. Don Abel Stearns gives the date March, 1842; Bandini, April, 1842. Coronel, who spent some time in the mines, and employed Indians in mining, asserts positively that it was made in 1842. Bancroft is contradictory in his dates. In the context of his history, he gives March, 1842, evidently following Stearns' statement. In his "Pioneer Register" he states that, "Antonio del Valle died in 1841, the same year that gold was discovered on his ranch." In his Bibliography of Pastoral California he refers to a manuscript by Alvarado, entitled, "Primitivo Descubrimiento," in which is an interesting account of the discovery of gold placers in the San Fernando Valley in 1841."

Wm. Heath Davis, usually one of the most reliable chroniclers of pioneer events, in his book, "Sixty Years in California," gives the date of the discovery 1840, and the discoverers a party of Sonorians traveling to Monterey. He evidently has confounded the discovery of *tepusite* (a variety of pyrites supposed to indicate the presence of gold) made by the Mexican mineralogist, Don Andres Castellero, with the real discovery of gold by Francisco Lopez, a year or two later.

Alfred Robinson, a pioneer of 1828, in his book, "Life in California," published in 1846, two years before Marshall's discovery, mentions a mine at Alisal, near Monterey, from which considerable quantities of silver ore had been taken. "This," he says, "was the first mine discovered in California." "At one time," he adds, "the mania for mining was so great that every old woman had her specimen of what she called ore." "Finally," he says, "rich mines of

placer gold were discovered near the Mission San Fernando." Evidently the gold fever had been epidemic in California long before the days of '49.

Robinson does not fix the date exactly, but from dates of events given in this connection, I infer that he intends to locate the event in 1842. Cornise, in his "Natural Wealth of California," reputed to be a standard work on the resources of the Golden State, informs his readers that the first gold known to have been found in the State was obtained in 1833, in the Valley of Santa Clara, Los Angeles County. Historically and geographically Cornise is years and miles distant from the truth. Powell, in his "Mineral Resources of the Golden State,"—another standard work—evidently has never heard of the discovery of gold in Southern California. He gives the story of Marshall's find, with a few sensational accompaniments not given by others. In the dialogue between Sutter and Marshall, Sutter remarks, "James you are lying," and James with none of the spirit of an old-time Californian neither shoots the top of Sutter's head off, nor offers to bet his pile that Sutter cannot prove him a liar, but coolly pulls his sack of gold dust instead of his revolver, and Sutter goes into ecstasies instead of eternity. We have had the shot gun episode, and the soap kettle addenda, but Powell's fabrication caps the climax for absurdity.

But to return from this digression :— From this mass of contradictory dates it is impossible to decide which is the correct date of the discovery. The strongest evidence seems to decide in favor of March, 1842, as the correct date.

In this connection, allow me to give an illustration of how false statements creep into historical narrative, are copied by one author after another, and often pass current for years as veritable history. In the last report (1888) of Hon. Wm. Irelan, State Mineralogist of California, a work of nearly a thousand pages published by authority of the State, and stamped with the great seal of the State of California, in describing the "San Feliciana Placer Diggings," he makes this remarkable statement :

"During the period from 1810 to 1840, Jose Bermudes and Francisco Lopez superintended the Mission Indians in working this gravel deposit. In 1842, finding that those deposits, though worked in a crude manner, paid exceedingly well, the Mexican government was petitioned to consider the territory between Piru Creek and the Soledad Cañon, and extending west to the Mojave Desert, mineral land, and that no grant be extended taking in this territory. This petition was granted by the government."

In Lewis Co.'s History of Los Angeles County, a publication

endorsed by a committee of this society (of which committee the writer was a member), this misstatement is copied as true history, but copied without credit to the source from which it was taken. In my inaugural address, delivered before this society last January—believing that the State, like the Church, ought to be infallible—I stated that gold was discovered and successfully mined in cañons of the Sierra Madre nearly forty years before Marshall found nuggets in the “Mill-race a Coloma.” And this misstatement has been published in our Annual, by the authority and with the approval of the Historical Society of Southern California. I hereby acknowledge my error, and retract the statement. The remarkable historical discovery of the State Mineralogist has found its way into the newspapers, and is traveling the rounds of the Pacific Coast, seeking whom it may deceive. There is not, so far as I can find, a particle of evidence, written or oral, to confirm his statement that the Mission Indians mined gold from 1810 to 1840, under the superintendency of Bermudes, Lopez, or any other man. It is pure fiction, palmed off upon him for fact by some garrulous fabricator.

It is said that Republics are ungrateful. Whether this be true or not, it is true that they are often unjust in the bestowal of their favors. Lopez, the real discoverer of gold in California, lived in obscurity, died in poverty, and sleeps his last sleep in a nameless grave. Marshall, the reputed first discover, obtained celebrity—world wide,—in his later years drew a pension of \$3,000 a year from the State, and after his death the grateful Republic erected a statue of bronze to his memory. Very little merit attaches to the discovery in either case. In both cases it was purely accidental; but whatever does, belongs to Lopez, not to Marshall, and still less to Sutter, who was also pensioned by the State.

Lopez did not attempt to conceal his discovery, nor did he attempt to gobble up all the gold in the mines. Sutter and Marshall are accused of attempting to do both. Failing to conceal their find, it is stated that they started off, post haste, to Monterey to obtain a grant of the land where the discovery was made from Gov. Mason. The Governor had no authority to give grants. It is claimed that after their return to Coloma, they called a council of the Indian chiefs in that vicinity, and obtained from them a lease for twelve years of the lands where gold was known to exist, then they levied tribute on the miners—at first one-half, and later one-third of all the gold obtained from the diggings. The miners did not respond promptly with their tithes; they were not long in discovering that Sutter and Marshall were attempting a piece of sharp practice.

Sutter did not own the land where the famous mill was located. It belonged to the public domain.

Sutter, in all probability, had heard of the gold discoveries in the south, and the incredulity with which he tells us he received Marshall's story, was probably an afterthought to give a dramatic effect to his narrative. He had been in Southern California with Micheltorena in 1845, and was present at the bloodless battle of Cahuenga, where that governor was forced to abdicate. Marshall was a member of Fremont's battalion. He was one of Captain Gillespie's garrison, and claims to have unspiked the cannon with which Gillespie repulsed the assault of the Californians, during the siege of Los Angeles, by Flores, in September, 1846. He spoke the Spanish language, and no doubt heard of the discovery of gold in the mountains near San Fernando. From the published reminiscences of pioneers, I should judge that every intelligent resident of California at that time, had heard of the discovery.

As to the yield of the San Fernando diggings, it is impossible to obtain any definite information. Don Abel Stearns puts it at from six to eight thousand dollars a year up to the time of American occupation, in 1847. Wm. Heath Davis gives the amount at eighty to one hundred thousand dollars for the first two years after the discovery. He states that Mellus at one time shipped five thousand dollars' worth of dust to Boston, on the ship Alert. Bancroft states that "By December, 1843, two thousand ounces of gold (worth about \$38,000) had been taken from the San Fernando mines, the greater portion of which was shipped to the United States." There was a great scarcity of water in the mines. The processes used in extracting the gold from the earth were crude and wasteful. Panning out was one of the principal. To pay even two dollars a day by such a process, the mines must have been quite rich. In 1854, it is stated that Francisco Garcia took out of the Santa Feliciana placers in one season, \$65,000 in gold—one nugget, worth \$1,900, was found in this gold belt.

Los Angeles is not classed among the mineral counties of the State, yet the yield of her placers has amounted to a considerable sum. The San Gabriel placers were very rich. As late as 1876 two companies were working them. One company reported a yield of \$1,365 for a run of twenty-six days, working five men, an average of \$10.50 to the man. In all the mountain creeks tributary to the Santa Clara and San Gabriel Rivers prospects can be found. In 1854 the Santa Anita diggings paid five dollars a day to the man. The great drawback to successful mining in our county is the scarcity of water.

Ben Truman, in his "Semi-Tropical California," a book written in 1874, says :

"During the past eighteen years Messrs. Ducommun and Jones, merchants of Los Angeles, have purchased, in one way and another, over two million dollars' worth of gold dust taken from placer claims of the San Gabriel River, while it is fair to presume that among other merchants, and to parties in San Francisco, has been distributed at least a like amount. The statistics of the San Francisco mint show that in one year nearly forty thousand dollars' worth of dust was sent from Los Angeles County for coining purposes."

There are a few specimens of gold taken from the Santa Feliciana placers, in 1842, still preserved (in jewelry and ornaments) by some of the native Californians of Los Angeles. The State should procure a specimen to put with the famous Marshall nugget in the museum of the State Mining Bureau.